

Tea & Toast: Here we go again – how to start something

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Getting started yourself

What are the mindsets and habits that get in the way of getting started? I'm going to look at three elements.

1. Procrastination – finding excuses not to get started
2. Perfectionism – a variation on procrastination that can feel easier to claim
3. Rumination – past regrets and future anxieties

Procrastination

What is procrastination?

One definition of procrastination is a “form of self-regulation failure characterized by the irrational delay of tasks despite potentially negative consequences.”

A radical definition from Susan Fowler is that procrastination is you trying to reclaim your time by compensating for the choice, connection, or competence missing in other parts of your life.

How can you overcome procrastination?

The first thing is to work out what kind of procrastination you are experiencing. Kendra Cherry, writing on Very Well Mind identifies some key causes:

- Not knowing what needs to be done
- Not knowing how to do something
- Not wanting to do something, or not caring if it gets done or not
- Lacking the initiative to get started
- Forgetting
- Believing that you work better under pressure, and thinking that you can finish it at the last minute
- Needing time to think about the task.

Like so many things, this is about self-awareness. Once you know what is causing your procrastination, you can do something about it. If it is a skills gap, you can fill that gap maybe by delegating. If it is a confidence gap, you can fill that gap with a support network.

Melody Wilding writes about over-thinking as a form of procrastination. Her tips include limiting the drain of decision fatigue:

1. Eliminate the minor decisions – if you want to start something new, work out what you can put on autopilot: schedule, food, clothing.
2. Construct creative constraints. For example, budget or style.

Perfectionism

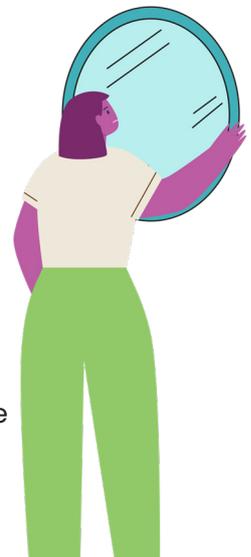
What is perfectionism?

The urge to perfectionism is about control, and it shows up in individuals and affects others. The Leadership Circle describes perfect as the 'measure of your need to attain flawless results and perform to extremely high standards in order to feel secure and worthwhile as a person.'

Which makes it hard to get things started, because an imperfect outcome reflects your sense of self-worth.

How can you overcome perfectionism?

The Leadership Circle offers a pathway to turn this urge around. In the model, perfect sits within the controlling tendency. Controlling is the neighbour of the creative competency of achievement. Ask yourself: what could I achieve if I wasn't using all my energy to control myself and others? What do I want to produce? Or maybe frighten yourself out of it with this question: Do I want my legacy to be my ability to control?



Writing in HBR, Rebecca Knight offers tips for curbing perfectionism:

- Recognise the power of just getting it done
- Find analogies from other areas, for example how first drafts of writing are seldom perfect and next drafts get better.
- Think about successes when you tried something new
- Enlist support from a colleague or friend

Melody Wilding also looks at perfectionism. Her take is that it stops effective decision making because it is all-or-nothing thinking. Her tips for overcoming it come as questions:

- What is one thing I could do today to bring me close to my goal?
- Which decision will have the biggest positive impact on my top priorities?

Rumination

What is rumination?

I've used Nick Petrie's definition of rumination:

Rumination is the mental process of thinking over and over about something, which happened either in the past or could happen in the future, and attaching negative emotion to it.

Petrie looks at rumination in the context of building and maintaining resilience. He compares rumination and reflection as negative and positive courses of action or inaction.

- Rumination is the negative act of regretting (over and over) the past and being anxious (over and over) about the future. Rumination doesn't produce anything but stress.

How can you overcome rumination?

While rumination requires you to hold on to the past, reflection happens when you let go. Reflection is the positive act of reviewing the past and planning the future. Review means to look at what happened, see what you can learn and move on. It also supports the habit of building up your personal reference library of successful experiences

A question to consider: *What can you control?* Hint: you can't control the past.

Getting started with others

I've got a couple of examples of starting things from scratch outside established business. One example is about a software solution for engaging students, the other is about creating artificial limbs. Both are very clear on the problem they are solving, but there is more.

I want to highlight two things that link the experiences:

1. They actively sought feedback and advice
2. They focused on what it would mean for people when they solved the problem NOT on how they would solve the problem



The software solution: Kurt Meyer and Paul Organ both went to boarding school before they met as architecture students. When they started looking at software for design, they saw the possibility of solving the boarding school problem of keeping track of students. They went back to their old schools and asked questions. And they developed an online platform for schools, students and families to keep track of attendance, events, permissions, and well-being. It's now used in 17 countries and presented as a student engagement tool.

A key moment for them came at a workshop with people from Amazon who

talked about planning your marketing launch before you develop the product. That concept has changed our approach to development: now we define the persona or customer we're building for before starting on the technical side.

The artificial limbs: this project focused on the people using the limbs and put their needs first in the design process. Students from the Victoria University of Wellington School of Design used the emotional connection between a person and their artificial limbs to inform their design process.

The artificial limbs available now on the market are very functional, but tend to make people's lives fit around the limb, rather than the other way round.

Actively seek advice

Let's stay with idea of actively seeking help by a little trip into business mentors.

I've looked at the words of advice from two independent business start ups who sought support from Business Mentors.

One is an event and freight business. Gareth and Kim were mentored by Anna Salek, who ran a tea business.

The other is a money management business. Min was mentored by Ellen Marie Varoy, a digital specialist.

Their gems of advice are:

- Do your homework – test things out, trial things, slow down, get feedback.
- Seek out and accept help and resources.
- Build your networks and connections well in advance of starting. Networks and connections are key in business and will help you when you are employed too!
- Recognise there is no 'normal' in business. There's always going to be the unexpected. So be clear about what matters and stay focused on that.
- Stay positive. Don't bury your head in the sand and don't give up; there's always something different you can do as long as you stay calm, think about things, look around you.
- Have fun! Every job has tough bits, so engage with the people and make the most of it.

Get past the decision-making gatekeeper

Your reality may be that you have the best idea in the world, but you can't get started until you get it past a decision-making gatekeeper, who may be your boss, or their boss.

Writing in HBR, Ethan Burris has advice for selling ideas up the chain of command. This is my take on the advice.

Protect the person's mana

Whoever the decision maker is, they have their own sense of themselves, their mana and authority. Offering an idea to start something new has the potential to undermine their authority. No one is immune to insecurity. Consider what insecurities your boss has and use that knowledge to plan when and how to present an idea to them.

Can you make an opportunity for 1:1 conversation?

Can you link the idea to goals in the workplan? Triggering a halo effect around your idea?, What will make the other person look good?

Present the idea to get the best possible reception

Think about the decision maker. Burris offers the idea of promotion focused leaders who focus on aspirations, the future, and playing to win, and prevention focused leaders who focus on vigilance, managing risk, and playing not to lose. Simply put: do they focus on opportunities or threats?

The same idea can be presented to meet the need of either type of audience.

Pick a frame and stay inside it

Combining opportunity and threat messages is counterproductive. You're asking your audience to hold two opposing ideas in their head. You need to sell them on the opportunity or threat – not both.

Another angle on this is to think of framing your idea with your organisation's values. If you are in a values-led organisation, this framing can clear the path. How does your idea support or demonstrate the company's values?

Anticipate obstacles

Even if you pitch the opportunity, not the threat, you'll eventually get challenged on the logistics. The idea is to let the gatekeeper come up with those questions. And you need to have the answers ready. Make time to brainstorm obstacles and objections so you can keep the conversation alive.

Use your team

I was drawn to a blog from the Ebling Group because of the sewing metaphor – pulling the thread through. The emphasis here is on keeping energy and engagement in a team. It's framed as general advice, and seems pertinent to the challenge of leading a team when you are starting something new. Because starting something new is another way of saying things are changing. Anything new displaces or at least compresses what is already established.

Draw on what you know about leading through change as you lead a team on something new. (Or come to our public programme!) Change energises and excites some people, and threatens those with a high need for certainty.



As a leader who is starting something, you need to be able to tell the 'why' story to your people.

Your people will want to know what they have to do to get the thing started. This is where you can focus on what it will mean for people when you solve the problem. Keeping that in mind will help maintain momentum if you have some slippage on what and how.

Keep talking about what success looks like.

Engage your team in creating the path. This is where reflection (review the past / plan your future) comes in handy.

Another practice to have in place as you start something is to use 'so that' statements. We're doing this so that this reinforces the why of each action and helps people connect what they are doing to the desired outcome.

The thing that you start is unlikely to be completed in one go. Identify the milestones to success and be sure to celebrate them. This keeps people engaged and maintains momentum.

Be prepared to start small

The idea of celebrating milestones is a good reminder about scale. Nothing starts big. And that thinking led me to Britney Cole's piece on the power of micro innovations.

Britney Cole does two things in her article: celebrates the value of micro-innovation, and identifies the things that stand in the way of innovation.

Maybe you've been thinking "but I don't even know what to start."

Here are some things that may be stopping you:

- To-do lists – Cole argues that to-do list create tunnel vision and limit innovation. The tasks on the list get in the way of seeing the bigger picture and goals.
- Fear – you might be in a position where you are afraid to share ideas and vision, or you may be a person who is inhibiting others from sharing ideas and vision.

Cole offers tips for supporting micro-innovation. They fit well with the ideas of pulling the thread through for your team.

1. Give others permission to speak
2. Ensure systems exist for people
3. Always be learning
4. Adopt the right mindset
5. Take needed downtime.

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Thanks for coming!

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